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METHOD FOR PROVIDING ABSENCE INFORMATION

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

[0001] This application is the US National Stage of International Application No. PCT/DE2003/002823, filed August 22, 2003 and claims the benefit thereof. The International Application claims the benefits of German application No. 10245642.9 filed September 30, 2002, both applications are incorporated by reference herein in their entirety.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

[0002] The invention relates to a method for providing absence information in a telecommunication system having a plurality of subscribers.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

[0003] In addition to the conventional telephony service features, modern forms of communication such as "Instant Messaging" and "Presence" are becoming increasingly important. In particular, the younger generation is already used to working with these forms of communication today, and it is to be assumed that they will also want to use these forms of communication in the working environment. This is supported by some firms, for example, which are moving toward this environment by using the IP convergence products.

[0004] In telecommunication systems, one subscriber learns of the absence of another as a result of the fact that the other subscriber does not accept the connection when a connection setup is attempted and, if an absence text has been defined,

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as a result of the fact that the calling subscriber receives this text message. If the called subscriber is already having a conversation at that time, this is signaled to the caller by means of the busy tone.

[0005] However, the caller only receives this information if said caller calls, i.e. dials the called party. The purpose of a "presence service" is to provide a subscriber with absence information or information about the availability of other subscribers directly, without the need to actually contact these other subscribers. This information can be, for example: Present, Away on vacation, Do not disturb, At lunch, etc.

[0006] Such presence services already exist for the internet data medium. The information is displayed to the subscriber in a subscriber list, i.e. a so-called buddy list. These buddy lists are a personal list of one or more personally selected subscribers whose presence status one wishes to track. In particular, they provide information about whether a selected person is currently "online", i.e. available.

[0007] Status information for every subscriber is already stored in many telecommunication systems or PBX systems today using the absence text and station guarding service features. This information is currently provided to the terminals when a call is made.

[0008] For example, a subscriber can have activated the standard absence text "Away on vacation until 6/20".

If a call to this subscriber is then made by another subscriber who is connected to the same telecommunication

system, the text message is sent to the calling subscriber and displayed in the display of the caller.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

[0009] The present invention therefore addresses the problem of specifying a method for providing absence information in a telecommunication system, whereby a subscriber can be continuously informed of the contactability of further subscribers, and can provide their own availability status to other subscribers.

[0010] This problem is solved by the claims.

[0011] Essential to the invention is the idea that status information (particularly absence information) is produced and captured at a first terminal, said terminal being assigned to a first subscriber. This information is then transferred to a switching node of a telecommunication system and stored there. The switching node then transfers the information to a second terminal, which is assigned to a second subscriber, such that the absence information is then available at the second terminal. In this way the second subscriber has the status of the first subscriber ready at all times. It is advantageous not only to integrate these novel communication paradigms into future IP products, but also to provide this functionality in the existing product environment (IP convergence). This in turn ensures that the existing investment of the customer retains its value (investment protection).

[0012] In an advantageous embodiment of the claimed method, the second terminal sends a request message to the switching node.

Following receipt of this request message, the switching node sends the current absence information relating to the first subscriber to the second terminal. In this way the information which is available at the second terminal can be updated as required.

[0013] Alternatively, in a further appropriate embodiment, the second terminal again sends the request message to the switching node but, after receiving the request message, the switching node sends current absence information about the first subscriber at specified time intervals. As a result, the information which is available at the second terminal is regularly updated and renewed.

[0014] As a further alternative, the second terminal again sends a request message to the switching node but, after receiving the request message, the switching node only sends current absence information about the first subscriber to the second terminal in each case if said absence information has changed. In this way the information which is available at the second terminal is only updated and renewed if a change has occurred. No data transmission takes place if the absence information remains the same, thereby allowing a reduction in the amount of data that must be transmitted.

[0015] In a further advantageous embodiment of the claimed method, said embodiment being particularly convenient for the user, the absence information about the first subscriber is automatically captured at the first terminal. The capture of the presence can take place in a simple way by establishing whether the terminal is switched on or off. Alternatively, the

capture of the presence is conceivable inter alia by means of a sensor, e.g. a movement indicator at the workstation. Additionally, the vacation information can be made available to the switching node by the personnel department.

[0016] The available absence information is usefully displayed on a display of the second terminal. This can be the display of a telecommunication terminal or telephone or a monitor of a computer, for example, or the absence information can also take the form of a voice message (text-to-speech) if the second terminal does not have a display, for example. For the representation provided by a telephone display having one or two lines, alphanumeric characters and standard symbols can be used. For the representation on a computer monitor, the information can be arranged more attractively using graphical means, small pictures and the like.

[0017] In an advantageous embodiment of the claimed method, the absence information about the first subscriber is stored in the second terminal or in a switching node or in another suitable device. The information is therefore still available if something else has been displayed on the display in the meanwhile, e.g. the locally selected telephone number of a desired called party.

[0018] In an embodiment of the claimed method, facilities of the telecommunication system e.g. the "absence text" and "station guarding" service features are preferably used when producing and storing the absence information. As a result, it is possible to continue using the hardware of existing systems which offer these known service features.

[0019] In an appropriate embodiment, a plurality of first terminals send the relevant absence information to the second terminal. In this way, a subscriber list which includes the corresponding first subscribers can be defined at the second terminal. The second subscriber can therefore specify a selection of other subscribers whose absence information said second subscriber wishes to have. Moreover, the first terminal preferably sends the absence information to a plurality of second terminals.

[0020] In a particularly advantageous embodiment of the claimed method, absence information relating to at least one external subscriber is additionally provided. The external subscriber, having a terminal which is assigned to said external subscriber, is not assigned to the telecommunication system. Instead, the external terminal is connected to the telecommunication system via a network or data network, e.g. the internet, via a LAN (local area network) or any other suitable network. It is highly attractive for users not only to track the presence status of subscribers on the same system but also to track the presence status of external subscribers who can be reached worldwide via the whole internet and, if so desired, to publish their own presence status via this external service.

[0021] A preferred embodiment of the claimed method uses a first assignment table in order to transform the absence information relating to the external subscriber from an absence information format of the external terminal into an absence information format of the telecommunication system.

[0022] Furthermore, a second assignment table is used in order to transform absence information in the opposite direction, i.e. from the absence information format of the telecommunication system into an absence information format of the external terminal. The exchange of information across system boundaries, i.e. the synchronization of the terminals, is therefore possible.

[0023] In an advantageous embodiment of the claimed method, standard protocols such as the Session Initiation Protocol (SIP), for example, are used for sending the absence information between terminals of a PBX and external terminals. In this way the platform-independent exchange of the absence information is possible.

[0024] The use of the claimed method is particularly advantageous in a telecommunication system which has the "absence text" and "station guarding" service features. In this way it is possible to provide an absence information service or "presence service", said service being available both to IP endpoints such as IP PC clients and IP telephones and to conventional system telephones and future terminals and applications, using existing service features of a traditional or known telecommunication system.

[0025] Further advantages and functionalities are derived from the dependent claims and from the following description of a preferred exemplary embodiment.

[0026] The embodiment that is proposed below is represented with reference to the example of a communication system, wherein the "absence text" service feature is described first. In this system, each subscriber having a display can activate an absence text which is configured in the system.

[0027] If a subscriber who has activated such a text is called, the corresponding absence text appears in the display of the caller. The texts can include variable parameters, wherein the parameters (e.g. time of day) are entered during the activation. The numeric keypad of the terminal is available for entering the additional characters.

[0028] The system has a specific number of absence texts, e.g. ten. In this case the maximum permitted character length of the absence text is 24 characters, for example. It is also possible to enter and send an individual text.

[0029] The "station guarding" (DND) service feature is discussed below, wherein each terminal station can activate station guarding for itself by means of a procedure. As a result of this service feature, incoming calls for this terminal station are not put through.

[0030] The claimed method uses the two service features which are introduced above for solving the problem. The "presence service" is firstly explained with reference to the provision of absence information. If this absence information is made continuously available, and not just in the event of a call, this presence status information can be used for implementing a presence service. By analyzing the information in the

absence texts and the station guarding status, the client can analyze the presence status information for its personal "buddy list" and also set its own "presence status". This analysis or setting of the presence status information is done using the existing station guarding or absence text service features.

[0031] The client reports the status information both as an icon, e.g. using a palm tree for "Away on vacation", and as a text providing further information when the mouse is moved over a "buddy", for example, e.g. "Away on vacation until: 6/20/2002".

[0032] The following table shows the possible statuses and how they are displayed on the PC client in each case:

Status number	Status Remote station	Status information	Display on client
1	No status information available	None	No dot Color icon person
2	No status information set, subscriber free	Online, free	Green dot Color icon person
3	No status information set, subscriber busy	Online, busy	Red Color icon person
4	No status	Offline	Gray dot

	information set, subscriber not registered		Gray icon person
5	Station guarding on	Online/offline + status	Yellow/gray dot Color icon person E.g. "Do not disturb" displayed if mouse moved over icon
6	Absence texts On		
7	0) Back at:	Online, offline + status	Yellow/gray dot Color icon clock Return time displayed if mouse moved over icon
8	1) Away on vacation until:	Online, offline 1) Away on vacation until:	Red/gray dot Color palm tree Date displayed if mouse moved over icon
9	2) Away on business until:	Online, offline 2) Away on business until:	Yellow/gray dot Color icon car/train/airplane Date displayed if mouse moved over icon
10	3) Out all day	Online, offline 3) Out all day	Yellow/gray dot Color icon person E.g. "Back tomorrow" displayed if mouse

			moved over icon
11	4) Out to lunch	Online, offline 4) Out to lunch	Yellow dot Color icon coffee cup "Break" displayed if mouse moved over icon
12	5) Unavailable	Online, offline 5) Unavailable	Red/gray dot Gray icon of a person E.g. "Unavailable" displayed if mouse moved over icon
13	6) Private tel.	Online, offline 6) Private tel.	Yellow/gray dot Color icon person Telephone number displayed if mouse moved over icon
14	7) Deputy	Online, offline 7) Deputy	Yellow/gray dot Color icon person Telephone number and name of deputy displayed if mouse moved over icon
15	8) At present	Online, offline 8) At present	Yellow/gray dot Color representation person Free text displayed if mouse moved over icon
16	9) In room:	Online, offline 9) In room:	Yellow/gray dot Color representation person

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			Room number/name displayed if mouse moved over icon
17	10) Other text	Online, offline 10) Other text	Green dot Color icon person with exclamation mark Text displayed if mouse moved over icon

[0033] The absence information is produced at the terminal. In this way the local status can be configured easily via a window or menus. If statuses require a further input, it should be possible to enter this as an option. A list of possible statuses, together with their names and a corresponding input field, is shown below:

Menu: File/My status

Checkbox:	Status name	Input field
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Vacation:	06/30/2002
<input type="checkbox"/>	Back at:	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Away on business until:	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Etc.	

[0034] The client must use these inputs again in order to set the traditional "station guarding" or "absence text" service feature accordingly. This ensures that desktop telephones featuring a 2-line display can use this functionality in a conventional manner without modification. In the case of future telephones having a larger display, the same "buddy

lists" can be viewed on the display in the same way as at the client.

[0035] The presence services offer interfaces for external programs in order to set and exchange presence status information. These are proprietary interfaces in some cases, and in some cases standard protocols such as e.g. SIP (Session Initiation Protocol) are used in order to exchange status information. These interfaces must be used by the PC client or the telephone. This is possible in the case of the aforementioned SIP protocol, for example.

[0036] A synchronization of the tables for any format can be performed by means of an assignment table showing the absence information in the relevant formats. The assignment is explained with reference to the example of presence status information coming from a telecommunication system and from a software messenger for internet applications, but can also be used analogously for other presence services and other telecommunication systems, having been modified accordingly.

[0037] The following table shows the synchronization in the telecommunication system to messenger direction:

Status number	Status information Telecommunication system	Status Messenger
1	None	Display as offline
2	Online, free	Online
3	Online, busy	On the phone
4	Offline	Display as offline

5	Online/offline + Status station guarding on	Occupied
6		
7	Online, offline + Status 0) Back at:	Back soon
8	Online, offline 1) Away on vacation until:	Absent
9	Online, offline 2) Away on business until:	Absent
10	Online, offline 3) Out all day	Absent
11	Online, offline 4) Out to lunch	Lunch break
12	Online, offline 5) Unavailable	Absent
13	Online, offline 6) Private tel.	Online
14	Online, offline 7) Deputy	Absent
15	Online, offline 8) At present	Online
16	Online, offline 9) In room:	Online
17	Online, offline 10) Other text	Online

[0038] The following table shows the opposite direction, i.e. the synchronization in the messenger to telecommunication system direction:

Status number	Status presence Messenger	Status information Telecommunication system
1	Show as offline	None
2	Online	Online, free
3	On the phone	Online, busy
5	Occupied	Online/offline + Status station guarding on
7	Back soon	Online, offline + Status 0) Back at, without time information
10	Absent	Online, offline 3) Out all day
11	Lunch break	Online, offline 4) Out to lunch

[0039] As shown in the above tables, a small loss of data information can arise when synchronizing the absence information between two different information formats. Since the messenger only allows a small number of status designations, it is not possible to specify different information on a display of a terminal of the telecommunication system, according to whether the subscriber is on vacation, on a business trip, out all day, unavailable, or has specified a deputy. All of the aforementioned statuses are represented as out all day.

[0040] It is clear that the completeness and accuracy of the absence information which is transferred or transformed is dependent on the completeness of the table having the smaller number of statuses. This current restriction will be avoided in the future by a general standard which has yet to be developed for the exchange of absence information.

[0041] All of the features which are disclosed in the application are claimed as essential for the invention in so far as they are novel, individually or in combination, over the prior art.